

# Ballots, Bullets and the African American Struggle in Georgia

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*Continuing problems with voter suppression and the brutal execution of Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta highlights racism and national oppression in the contemporary South*

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*“This is why I say it’s the ballot or the bullet. It’s liberty or it’s death. It’s freedom for everybody or freedom for nobody. America today finds herself in a unique situation. Historically, revolutions are bloody. Oh, yes, they are. There has not ever been a blood-less revolution, or a non-violent revolution. That don’t happen even in Hollywood. You don’t have a revolution in which you love your enemy, and you don’t have a revolution in which you are begging the system of exploitation to integrate you into it. Revolutions overturn systems. Revolutions destroy systems.” (Malcolm X, El Hajj Malik Shabazz at the King Solomon Baptist Church in Detroit on April 12, 1964)*

Atlanta, Georgia, often referred to in recent decades as a “mecca” for African Americans in the southern United States, has become a focal point in the movement to end police brutality.

Outside a Wendy’s fast food restaurant on June 12, a 27-year-old Black man was reported to police for sleeping in his vehicle.

Once two white police officers arrived on the scene the entire atmosphere shifted to one of suspicion, questioning, interrogation, breathalyzer testing, attempted arrest, confrontation and execution by law-enforcement. The entire episode was captured from various angles on video as was the case in regard to the recent murder of **George Floyd**, 46, in Minneapolis.

Since the brutal killing of Floyd on May 25, the U.S. has been alight with mass demonstrations, urban rebellions along with a fierce political debate over the current status and future of policing. More than twenty people have been killed and in excess of 10,000 arrested as the municipalities, state governments and the White House deploy security forces in an effort to halt, contain and misdirect the antiracist movement.



Atlanta Wendy's turned into memorial for Rayshard Brooks gunned down by white cop

In the immediate aftermath of the killing of Brooks, people in Atlanta took to the streets picketing the restaurant and shutting it down. The Wendy's restaurant where the killing took place was later burned down the following evening. Hundreds of people blocked the expressway near the location while **Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms** announced the dismissal of the police officers involved in the incident.

By June 17, the two officers, **Garett Rolf and Devin Brosnan**, were facing criminal charges. Rolf, who was seen in the video firing the fatal shots which hit Brooks twice in his back, was indicted on 11 criminal counts including felony murder. Brosnan, who was placed on administrative leave, is also said to be awaiting charges for aggravated assault. Although Brosnan did not discharge his weapon, he was videotaped sitting on the back of Brooks prior to his being shot to death.

Image on the right: Atlanta police interrogate Rayshard Brooks prior to shooting him death



The police action against Brooks prompted the resignation of Atlanta **Police Chief Erika Shields** which was announced by Mayor Bottom on June 13. The mayor said the shooting death of Brooks was unjustified and the police chief had decided to allow for new leadership in the department.

A lawyer for the Brooks family, **L. Chris Stewart**, said to the media that the homicide was

completely unjustified. Brooks had asked the police officers if he could walk home after the questioning and alcohol testing. Instead he was placed under arrest prompting a confrontation with Brooks. The African American man later attempted to flee the police effort to put him in handcuffs and was shot to death.

According to Attorney Stewart,

“It didn’t have to go to that level. And that’s what we’re saying in America with policing, is this type of empathy is gone. ... Where is the empathy in just letting him walk home?” (See [this](#))

The widow of Brooks, **Tomika Miller**, said:

“I can never get my husband back. I can never get my best friend. ... It’s just going to be a long time before I heal.”

Brooks was a father and was well-loved by his relatives who spoke passionately about the struggle to win justice in the case.

### **Georgia Primary Reveals Further Voter Suppression**

Although the Democratic race for the presidential nominee appears to be sealed in favor of former vice-president and **Senator Joe Biden**, there were enormous problems reported in the recently-held elections on June 9. On election day people waited for hours before being able to cast their ballots.

Problems included the refusal of machines to accept ballots and the purging of people from the rolls of qualified voters. Many of these difficulties occurred in predominantly African American neighborhoods.

Others complaints included the failure of the election officials to mail absentee ballots to voters requesting them. **Governor Brian Kemp**, a Republican, is the former Secretary of State. Kemp held that position when he ran against former State Democratic Legislative minority leader Stacey Abrams. The gubernatorial election was held in November 2018 and was marred by accusations of voter suppression as well.

Despite a legal and political challenge by the Abrams campaign, Kemp prevailed and has served as governor since the calamitous events of 2018. Georgia is one of the states impacted severely by the COVID-19 pandemic. Transmissions of COVID-19 cases are accelerating in Georgia while Kemp has been an advocate, like Trump, of “reopening” the national economy.



Georgia voters faced enormous problems in Democratic primary on June 9, 2020

The state is a center for the food production industry which has been devastated by the pandemic. Many plants were closed during April and May while workers contracted the virus in great numbers. Kemp seems to be oblivious to the spread of COVID-19 in Georgia. As the public health situation worsened in the U.S. after mid-to-late March, the governor said that he was not aware that asymptomatic carriers of the virus could infect others.

A [report in the New Yorker magazine](#) said of the situation that:

“In Georgia, state and local officials are currently blaming each other. State officials are trying to emphasize that the problems took place in only a few of the state’s numerous counties—as if that weren’t exactly the issue. But, as election experts, and Democrats in Congress, have been saying for weeks, safeguarding our elections this year, even more than most years, is a job bigger than any one precinct or state.”

### **The Need for Independent Political Action**

Events in the U.S. since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, the subsequent economic downturn and the rise in the mass struggle against racism, illustrates the necessity for a fundamental break between the African American people, their allies and other oppressed communities, with the Democratic Party. Malcolm X emphasized the importance of this challenge as being essential in the strategic objectives of African Americans. This position was articulated in the same above-quoted passage from the speech “Ballots or Bullets” delivered in April 1964, another election year.

Malcolm X believed that a programmatic approach was important if the institutional racism in the U.S. was to be effectively eradicated. Of course the President Donald Trump’s White House has been a perpetuator of bigotry and prejudice against African Americans and other racially oppressed groups. Immigrants, people of Latin American, Asian and Middle Eastern descents are routinely targeted for racial profiling and selective prosecution.

The Democratic Party has authored, shepherded and implemented draconian legislation which resulted in the further mass incarceration of millions. The Crime Bill, Effective Death Penalty Act, unprecedented levels of deportations and the militarization of the police has occurred under the leadership of both ruling class dominated parties.

There are still no plans for the adoption of a national health insurance scheme which could guarantee everyone in the U.S. medical care. Since the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted Black and Brown communities, it is unconscionable that the Democratic Party leadership and the Biden campaign is offering no concrete policy reforms to address the present healthcare crisis.

Whether African Americans pursue nonviolent direct action, marches, violence through property destruction or electoral politics, they are being attacked by the repressive apparatus of the state on behalf of the ruling class. Consequently, a unified program of action which would seek to form alliances based on ending the system of oppression and exploitation provides the only hope for structural change in the U.S.

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